



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

# Reviewing Stand

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### **Do Corporations and Labor Unions Serve the Public Interest?**

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System planned in conjunction with the sixth in a series of six academic conferences being conducted by Northwestern University during its Centennial

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**THE REVIEWING STAND** is a weekly radio forum presented by Northwestern University. The program was first broadcast by Station WGN, Chicago, October 14, 1934. It has been on the air continuously since that time, originating in the WGN studios, and, since 1935, carried by stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System. **THE REVIEWING STAND** presents members of the Northwestern University faculty and distinguished guests from business, government, education, and the press in round table discussions of contemporary problems--the questions that are in the news. The program is under the direction of James H. McBurney, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University, and Miss Myrtle Stahl, Director of Educational Programs, WGN, Chicago.

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# Do Corporations and Labor Unions Serve the Public Interest?

**MR. McBURNEY:** Our discussion today is an outgrowth of the Sixth Academic Conference held on the campus of Northwestern University as a part of the Centennial Program. We present W. Willard Wirtz, Professor of Law at Northwestern University and Co-Chairman of this Conference; Abraham Brussell, member of the Chicago Bar and General Counsel for the Illinois State CIO; and Colonel John Slezak, President of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association on the question: "Do corporations and labor unions serve the public interest?" What do you say to that, Brussell?

**MR. BRUSSELL:** Speaking for labor unions, I definitely say they do serve the public interest. They do it in several ways. In the first place, they serve their members and workers generally in the economic sphere; they improve the economic welfare of 15 to 16 million members of organized labor and 25 million members who are not members of the unions. They bring industrial democracy into being; they bring cultural benefits; they improve the status of civil rights; they improve the psychological attitude of men toward their jobs; they eliminate fear by providing security; they give dignity of job to their members; they also help all other segments of society.

## 'Serve Public Interest'

The participation of the unions in the determination and development of domestic and foreign policy and in general political life, in cooperation with all other groups, in promoting the welfare of our country, means in my opinion, they do serve the public interest.

**MR. McBURNEY:** Here are some of the ways in which an attorney for the CIO thinks labor unions serve the public interest. Colonel, you are

President of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association—do corporations and labor unions serve the public interest?

**COLONEL SLEZAK:** I can say to that an unqualified "Yes" because at the beginning, the public decides whether they do or not. Those who do not, cease to be. As you well know approximately 90% of the corporations that get started, go out of business because they are not successful, meaning they did not serve the public interest. However, in my estimation the question is too broad to be handled completely on a yes and no basis. It seems to me it should be split into smaller parts. In other words, if we are going to eat an elephant, we have to cut him into smaller pieces that we can bite on. In the first place, as far as unions are concerned, they are dealing with only a certain number of corporations, which is quite understandable. Thus, from the corporation's standpoint, you have two phases of the problem involved. The unions represent approximately 25% of the employees of the nation. Probably the question can properly be divided: Do corporations serve the public interest? Do labor unions serve the public interest? And how well is public interest served when they deal together?

**MR. McBURNEY:** You have broken our question down a little bit. Wirtz, what do you say to the Colonel's analysis?

## 'Threat to Society'

**MR. WIRTZ:** Mine is a "Yes—but" answer. I defer to no one in my respect to the contribution that labor unions and corporations have made to this society. I think they have contributed greatly to our standard of living, to the dignity of the individual in some respects. I think they were probably responsible for bringing

World War II to a successful conclusion, but I keep worrying about the possibility that I am part of this elephant which the Colonel's corporations are breaking up bit by bit so they can eat it. It seems to me there are some forces operating today in the American society (and they are represented by the labor unions and the corporations) which are a real threat to this society and which may be driving democracy, as we know it, very fast to the grave.

MR. MCBURNEY: What do you mean by "the public interest"?

### Public Interest

COLONEL SLEZAK: McBurney, to me "public interest" means this: under our constitutional form of government and free enterprise social and economic system, the individual is the most important unit of the setup. In other words, our whole social and economic setup is organized so that the individual has a chance to develop himself fully and effectively. In having a free opportunity to develop himself, he can naturally serve the interest of society and himself to the greatest extent. Now, under that social setup, he naturally cannot do everything for himself so that we have agriculture providing food items for him that he cannot produce for himself. We have corporations that have been organized to provide him goods and services as and when he needs them. You might say corporations are merely in-between agents who buy raw materials, buy labor and transform them into goods and services for the individual's use. Now, as long as they are doing the job well and effectively, they are serving public interest. However, one thing to be remembered is that corporations, labor unions, agriculture or government itself are only a means to an end. They are only service organizations to the individual to serve his needs. As far as government is concerned, the primary function of the government in that respect is to serve as an umpire to see to it that the individual has a chance to develop and exercise his ability.

MR. WIRTZ: Is it enough that govern-

ment serves as an umpire? It just occurs to me that if that is the limit of the government's function, I won't be able to drive home this morning as the only route open to me is the public highway. It occurs to me too, there won't be any need of finishing wrapping the Christmas packages today because they can't be mailed. That is a government service beyond that of umpire. There is no point in our boy going to school because he is going to a public school. Doesn't the government have to step in further? Your emphasis on the individual's interest or the individual's dignity and the public interest is important, but isn't it essential that there be some forces to see that there are no bullies in this society? No governmental bullies, no corporate bullies, no labor union bullies?

COLONEL SLEZAK: To the extent that government starts to be something more than an umpire, in my estimation, to that extent we are degenerating. In our form of society, anything that the individual or group of individuals, as such, can do for themselves they can do more effectively that way than the government can. Of course, I agree with what you said about bullies. The question of bully to me means that the umpire prevents a bully from being a bully. The umpire enforces the rules as in basketball or football games. The umpire does not create the rules. The umpire does not play the game. He only sees that the game is played according to the rules.

### Welfare of Individual

MR. BRUSSELL: I disagree with the Colonel and disagree a little bit with Wirtz. It seems to me, looking at our history, in the first place, government has not been an umpire in those situations when action was needed. The enactment of the antitrust laws meant government was putting into actual effect certain accepted ideas of what was best for the American community. In the enactment of the various laws in the days of 1933, government was not acting as an umpire. It was doing something definite in assisting one group or the other. I think that



the general concept of individual welfare and individual good is correct, and we should keep it in mind. But it seems to me that organized labor has taken a more realistic attitude toward that in the sense that it wants to solve the problem of the individual and the best way to solve that problem in our complex society is to have certain groups such as organized labor, help the individual attain that individual freedom.

MR. WIRTZ: I don't think our views are far apart as long as we stay at the general level. I would like to ask the question that is in my mind in specific terms. Let's take, just for example, the stabilization program. I think most of the public of which I think I am a part, want a stabilization program in this country. I can't help feeling that American labor and American management is today making it almost impossible for us to have a real stabilization program. The labor unions have attacked wage stabilization and the corporations have attacked price stabilization. All I know is my individual situation is, I think, as a consequence, getting worse and worse and worse.

### High Standard of Living

COLONEL SLEZAK: Wirtz, I think history is the best proof of what I mean. Under a free, open, competitive system without controls, we have attained the highest standard of life ever known anywhere at any time among any group of people. Doesn't it make good sense in a time of emergency not to abandon those methods? Other nations have been forced to live at a lower standard of living because enforcement of controls and so forth not only kills the individual initiative to do things, but also involves the use of hundreds of thousands of employees. As an example, in the United States in 1933 we had 900,000 employees; in 1950 we had over 2,000,000 federal employees. Now, frankly, who is to support those employees? They are not productive. They are not producing goods and services, they are not producing food. They eat food, they use goods and services in order to perform their

functions of control, and what-have-you. To that extent they are taking it out of you and me; in this way they are helping the inflationary trend you were mentioning.

MR. McBURNEY: Would you say the umpire is getting too big?

COLONEL SLEZAK: Yes. May I add, it wasn't government who made those laws you mentioned. It was the people through the Senate and through their elected representatives, and again I go to the individual. It was the individual who ruled that monopoly is not in the best interest of the nation.

MR. McBURNEY: Colonel, you keep referring to the individual as though all individuals were identified in one way or another with unions or corporations.

COLONEL SLEZAK: I don't mean that.

MR. McBURNEY: At the risk of being exceedingly naive, I am not a member of a union nor do I own any stock in any corporation. Where do I come out? My situation keeps deteriorating day by day and month by month. That is the public interest with which I am concerned and with which a good many of those individuals to whom you refer, millions of people in America, are concerned. They are coming out of the little end of the horn in this fight, if we may call it a fight between the corporations and the unions.

### 'Individuals Form Government'

COLONEL SLEZAK: McBurney, when I speak about the individual, I mean he is the basis of our whole setup. He is above the corporation; he is above government; he is above the union; he is above anything. He is the boss who decides what institutions we shall have to serve him. In other words, I don't relate him in connection with being a stockholder or being anything. He is the man who forms the government and whenever corporations get the idea they are sufficient unto themselves, that they are an end in themselves, they are not

serving public interest. Whenever unions get an idea that they are unto themselves sufficient, and all-important, that the rest of society should serve them, they are not serving the public interest.

**MR. BRUSSELL:** As in many other situations, we talk in general principles and there is little room for disagreement. I would like to answer the Colonel's analysis and at the same time try to answer Wirtz' specific problem.

**MR. MCBURNEY:** Wirtz' specific problem had to do with the inflationary pressure from corporations and unions.

**MR. BRUSSELL:** That bears out what I said. The true function of government is not simply to be an umpire in the resolving of problems that are presented outside of governmental circles because government is right in the area of the problem. If there had been prior to or at the time of the outbreak of the Korean War an adequate fiscal monetary program, if there had been the proper kind of legislation, if government had acted—whoever made up government—and if they could have had some statutes enacted which would stabilize prices and wages, we would not have the difficulties we have today. We must accept it realistically. Congress failed to enact legislation which would prevent us from having inflation. The question is, what are the unions going to do about it? What are the corporations going to do about it? The unions point out the way the legislation is loaded. They are bearing the heavier burden of inflation. They are trying to equalize the process. It is difficult but very important to call the attention of the public to the fact this legislation has been loaded. The unions are carrying out their patriotic duty of saying it is wrong, that it should be changed.

### Wages and Profits

**COLONEL SLEZAK:** Let me answer that with some facts. The total national income in 1951, projecting it from the third quarter through fourth quarter, will be 275.3 billion dollars.

Out of that, wages will amount to 177.4 billion dollars or 67.7%. It is a good chunk of the total. Let's jump through other material and go to the corporation profits. The corporation profits will amount to 45.4 billion dollars or 16.6% and out of that, government will take taxes. In other words, corporation profit after taxes will amount to 6.7%. It has been said by some of the CIO unions that you can raise that 67% in wages without affecting the prices. Let us imagine you do it by 10%. In such case you eliminate the 6.7%. This means the 6.7% does not go to the stockholder, to the owner of the corporation. In 1951 it is estimated he got only 3.1%, about 4% of the total and the rest of it remained for building additional facilities, research development, and so on. I am adding these facts so you will see to what extent the burden can be thrown the other way.

### Campaign Pressures

**MR. WIRTZ:** I respect your figures, Colonel. But there is another set of figures that I understand still better. That is the set I get at the end of every month when I figure my own position, and realize it is getting worse and worse and worse. I know the record is that American industry opposed the Capehart amendment insisting their profits not be reduced; labor walked off the Wage Stabilization Board saying a 10% increase wasn't enough; you both bucked Regulation W; you both fought tax programs of one kind or another when you didn't like them. I feel the public's representation in government failed to act. I have the feeling they are no longer my representatives. It costs so much today to elect a Congressman and Senator that you people are electing them. They don't represent us any longer (most of them, at least) as a geographical area; they represent the people who pay the hundreds of thousands of dollars for their campaign expenditures, and those seem to be primarily people from American industry, and to some extent from American labor. I don't think I am represented today as a result of the pressures you bring about in a campaign.



MR. BRUSSELL: I am sorry, Wirtz, to have to say that Labor doesn't merit what you suggested about electing people to Congress, whether it is the House or the Senate. Fortunately, the experience of the last election doesn't seem to bear that out. There are a couple of other things to consider. Labor does, of course, emphasize the basic nature of your complaint, namely, that the average working man has trouble buying sufficient milk, meat and the like for his children and his family, regardless of the figures of national income. There are other things to consider. For example, I am convinced an increase in wages based on productivity would go along no matter what the thinking of Colonel Slezak would be on that score. I also believe it is only fair to say again that from the point of view of our present situation, government has not acted properly. I think it is our duty to call the attention of the public to the fact so that government will act properly.

### New Building Code

MR. WIRTZ: Let's take a specific case, the housing program. Why is it with the housing emergency the way it is now, the trade unions, the building trades in Chicago have joined up with the building contractors to buck a new building code. American labor and American industry are doing something to the housing program. I don't know what it is, but it does not seem to me to reflect the public interest.

MR. BRUSSELL: We have to consider the problem the same as we consider other problems from the national welfare; when we have the problem of the enactment of a protective tariff, when we have the problem of enacting a subsidy for the farmer or farm parity program, we look at the problem nationwide. Now, with regard to the unions in the building trades and the contractors in the building trades, it is an answer to say that the problem cannot be solved solely between the union and the contractor, that the nation does have an interest, that

there should be a subsidy. Furthermore, I believe the developments here in Chicago have indicated a growing recognition by everyone that greater productivity per man, in other words, a reduction of unit cost in housing is another step forward. I believe those are happier developments.

COLONEL SLEZAK: Subsidy is merely one way of placing the inefficiency of one group on the backs of the rest of the citizens to bear.

MR. WIRTZ: What is the alternative? I don't like subsidies either. I think the subsidies from government are justified only if the private forces are not producing what we need. Take the housing picture . . .

COLONEL SLEZAK: The answer is the individual citizen's interest on the local level! Naturally the situation you described came about as the result of monopoly in which two pressure forces probably agreed to relax the pressure—maybe they are cooperating, or maybe they are just tired. Don't you see, there is not enough competition. Whenever you get a situation where you do not have enough competition, you get that sort of thing.

### Competition

MR. WIRTZ: Is there too little competition? Or are they such powerful units that they are in a position to dictate the result in terms of their own interest. Perhaps competition between smaller interests might help me?

COLONEL SLEZAK: That sort of a situation is against public interest regardless of what you have. Monopoly of business is not for the best public interest and certainly monopoly of labor is just as much against public interest.

MR. BRUSSELL: I would say, in view of the development in our industrial society, that one of the definite reasons why organized labor has protected the public interest is the fact that, given the natural development of corporations into monopolistic groups, unless we have a competitor

in the form of labor, we have the situation of one group controlling the field. I do not think that organized labor has reached the monopoly, Colonel, that I believe the corporations have achieved in the last 25 years. I believe one of the benefits has been the competition to monopoly which organized labor offers.

MR. WIRTZ: May I suggest one other aspect that bothers me. Brussels and Slezak have at various points suggested this is my fault, the public's fault, because the public has not acted on this, that and the other thing. Another piece of the picture is that so many of my sources of information are controlled by one of the large groups, namely the corporate groups and their control of the newspapers. I don't mind a situation in which there are several corporations servicing the public in a particular area. I am worried very much about the fact that most of the people in this country today receive almost all of their information from monopoly newspapers in their area.

### Monopoly Newspapers

COLONEL SLEZAK: I cannot agree with that. Of course, you will admit that sort of a situation does not exist in Chicago?

MR. WIRTZ: Right.

COLONEL SLEZAK: You will admit it does not exist in Washington, D.C. You will admit it does not exist in New York. I don't know how many other cities would be included.

MR. WIRTZ: In most metropolitan areas in the country today, there is one newspaper serving that community.

MR. BRUSSELL: I would like to make the comment that any time a union becomes news in the public press, it is interesting to note the attitude which is displayed toward it in the means of communication. Unions are highly dramatic and the press leaves nothing unturned to make them more dramatic to the reader.

MR. WIRTZ: You know, frankly, you

persuade me pretty much on these various points. I am not too much worried about the situation as it is today. It is not so much that I feel I have been hurt as a member of the public. I am scared. I am scared about the future. Two things particularly bother me. One is that I just have the feeling that if we have another depression of any kind, the large corporations and the large unions are going to refuse to make the concessions that will be necessary to get us on through. I can't imagine the labor unions, most of them, accepting the wage decreases that may be necessary, and I have a feeling that the corporations are going to insist again on keeping prices up and letting production go down. That aspect of the future worries me. The other is that I see here a powerful political struggle. I can't believe we still stay in equilibrium. I have the fear that one large group or another is going to win out in this thing. I don't like what that means.

### Apathy of People

COLONEL SLEZAK: I do not see that at all. As long as the individual gets interested and keeps his service organizations doing what they are supposed to do for him, and if they do not, throws them out—which includes everybody, including government—we don't have to fear. But if people through their apathy and disinterestedness pay no attention to their local government or state government, frankly, we cannot help our way of life because the very bloodstream, everything that we have, depends on individual participation in it. If we will not participate, we might as well forget it.

MR. BRUSSELL: I think, Wirtz, your thoughtful question deserves serious consideration yet, at the same time, I am not of the same opinion with regard to the probability of disaster. I think every democratic society, every democratic people must realize that they have the responsibility of making decisions to insure their own existence. If we don't make those decisions, we not only will not survive, we shouldn't survive. I think, how-



ever, that when we see what has happened in this country in the last 30 years in the various crises if we accept these crises as normal procedure as a normal event and if we keep our heads and as individuals know that unless we work together, disaster will surely face us, I would expect that we will solve the problem of the future the way we have in the past, not perfectly, but enough to keep us going and continue progressing.

### Governmental Powers

MR. WIRTZ: I like that answer. I respect completely that democracy ought to work on the basis of individual participation in the administration of government, but may I ask a question almost plaintively. It seems to me that today corporations and labor unions do exercise what are virtually governmental powers. Is there any prospect or possibility of the development of a concept of kind of a stewardship which would involve the corporations and the labor unions reflecting my interest as well

as the special interest of their members?

COLONEL SLEZAK: As a part of their job, they are doing it. I still feel, Wirtz, that they should serve their primary purpose to produce goods and services within our free enterprise system, be good citizens. The very fact that we have developed the highest standard of living known at any time, anywhere, means they have been serving their purpose very well.

MR. BRUSSELL: Wirtz, I concur with your thought. I simply say unions have been doing that since their existence. Their first struggle was for existence and rightly. In their economic activity today they realize that duty to take part in everything that affects the general welfare.

MR. WIRTZ: I would be glad to come back to the proposition that really, in the end, this depends upon the exercise of individual responsibility by every citizen of this country . . .

ANNOUNCER: I'm sorry gentlemen, but our time is up.



# Suggested Reading



Compiled by William Huff,  
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,  
Deering Library, Northwestern University.



ARNOLD, THURMAN W. *The Bottleneck of Business*. New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1940.

A history of industrial tie-ups caused by management and labor, with a discussion of the laws passed and the movements started to try to end them.

HURFF, GEORGE B. *Social Aspects of Enterprise in the Large Corporation*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950.

An analysis of the concept that corporations should be accountable to their stockholders and to the public.

LEVY, ADALBERT B. *Private Corporations and Their Control*. 2 vols., London, Routledge, 1950.

Includes sections on: I. Historical and economic background, II. Legal problems of private corporations, III. Shareholders rights and duties, IV. Management and control.

TANNENBAUM, FRANK. *A Philosophy of Labor*. New York, Knopf, 1951.

"The historical development of trade unions as a social movement creating a natural society and acting as the great conservative force of our time, the real alternative to the authoritarian state."

WERNE, BENJAMIN. *The Law of Labor Relations*. New York, Macmillan, 1951.

Background material on the rights and duties of labor and management, and also on the unfair practices of both.

*Academy of Political Science. Proceedings* 24:403-13, May, '51. "Labor's Role in the Defense Mobilization Program." G. MEANY.

The secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Labor discusses the type of businessman who is running the defense program and the part labor would like to take in it.

*Advanced Management* p. 16-18, Sept., '51. "Better Management Benefits Everybody." A. C. SPURR.

"Industry and commerce in this West Virginia area are strong boosters for a community development program . . ."

*American City* 64:106, Aug., '49. "Cooperation Between Industry and Community." J. E. GREER.

The executive director of a nonprofit, nonpartisan community development organization lists suggestions to be followed by industries which want to forward community self-help programs.

*American Economic Review* 40:435-72, May, '50. "American Capitalism: Where Are We Going?"

A group of papers on present and future economies in the U. S.

*American Economic Review* 41:85-105, May, '51. "Executive Decisions at the Top Level."

Papers delivered at the annual meeting of the American Economic Association: "Introductory Remarks" by Leverett Lyon, "Executive Decisions at



the Top Level" by Forest D. Siefkin, and "How Are Top Executive Decisions Made?" by Ralph E. Flanders.

*American Magazine* 149:24-5, June, '50. "Is Labor Riding for a Fall?" J. F. LINCOLN.

Agriculture, industry, finance and labor have each had a turn at the head of the nation's economic system. Will labor, like the first three, fall because of misuse of its power and disservice to the public interest?

*Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 275:140-54, May, '51. "Civil Rights in Labor-Management Relations." P. B. WILLAUER; A. J. GOLDBERG.

An attorney for big business gives management's view of the use of power by the trade unions, followed by the outlook of the unions as expressed by the general counsel of the C.I.O.

*Forbes* p. 19-40, Jan. 1, '51. "Report on American Industry."

"Evaluation and percentage rating of 198 major corporations on how well management handles its relations with the public, labor, community and stockholders."

*Fortune* 43:78-83, Feb., '51. "Transformation of American Capitalism."

A history of labor unions in the U. S., their achievements, and a forward look at their problems and challenges.

*Monthly Labor Review* 73:383-419, Oct., '51. "Labor Vitalization During National Emergencies." E. J. BURTT, JR.

The responsibility of management and unions for shifting labor to the industries where it is most needed during a national emergency is described by a professor of economics from Boston University.

*Monthly Labor Review* 73:409-413, Oct., '51. "American Trade-Unions in the Present Emergency." S. BARKIN.

Examines the foreign and domestic policies of American trade unions during the Korean crisis.

*Reader's Digest* 56:125-9, June, '50. "Big Business Is Dangerous." E. CELLER.

Contends that the most efficient economic system for the U. S. is one free from the socialistic management of business by bureaucrats, and also free from control by big competitors, suppliers, customers, or outside financial interests.

*Rotarian* 78:26-7, Feb., '51. "Have Unions Helped Factory Workers?" W. I. KING and W. GREEN.

An economist and a labor leader debate the value of unions to the worker.

*Virginia Quarterly Review* 26:530-43, Autumn, '50. "Welfare Capitalism: Opportunity or Delusion?" A. T. MASON.

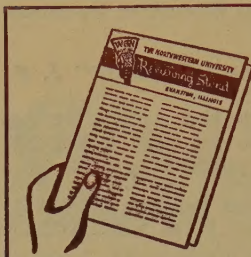
Pictures welfare capitalism as a term covering corporate action which may or may not be for the public good.

*Vital Speeches* 16:325-30, Mar. 15, '50. "The Mid-Century Decision Makers." J. ELFENBEIN.

Shows why the directors of huge corporations have a task akin to trusteeship, in which the obligations owed to government, consumers, employees and owners must be rightly weighed.

*Vital Speeches* 16:508-12, June 1, '50. "Take Off the Blinkers." C. A. GRAY.

The president of a small business shows why big business is needed and "how businessmen can make capitalism more appreciated" by taking an active part in the life of their community and nation.



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8. Are We Winning the War of Words?
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10. How Does Humor Affect Our Lives?
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